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Egypt: The Presidential Succession

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Egypt: The Presidential Succession

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] of the
Office of Near Eastern-South Asian Analysis with
contributions from [] of the Office of
Central Reference and [] of the Office of
Global Issues. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. []

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 July 1983
was used in this report.*

President Mubarak has no formally designated political heir, but Defense Minister Abu Ghazala probably would assume power swiftly if the presidency should suddenly become vacant. Abu Ghazala is popular with the armed forces and displays leadership qualities that many believe Mubarak lacks.

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Abu Ghazala is the leading candidate to become vice president,

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Mubarak may believe that Abu Ghazala is too influential either to be appointed as vice president or to be passed over by appointing someone else. Mubarak, therefore, eventually could name Abu Ghazala and a civilian as dual vice presidents, thus recognizing Abu Ghazala's stature while assuaging civilian concerns about the extent of military influence in the government.

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Although the two men currently have a good relationship, Abu Ghazala could lose his position before Mubarak—who is healthy and virtually the same age—leaves office. The Defense Minister is vulnerable to allegations of corruption, including irregularities in the shipment of US arms to Egypt during Abu Ghazala's service as military attache in Washington from 1976 to 1980. Moreover, there is a possibility of friction between the quick-acting Abu Ghazala and the more cautious Mubarak.

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Should Abu Ghazala falter, new contenders probably would emerge from the senior military ranks. None of the prominent civilians in the regime appear to be strong presidential timber because of age, poor health, or the lack of a base of support.

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Whoever the leading contenders are, the Egyptian military will play a key role in selecting the next President. In most circumstances, senior officers would informally convey their preferences to members of the government and ruling party. In the event of widespread disorder or some other serious crisis, however, the military probably would act more directly and would possibly seize power itself.

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The most likely successors to Mubarak—either Abu Ghazala or someone else who reflects the military's views—would continue the main lines of Mubarak's policies. These include cooperation with the United States, observance of the peace treaty with Israel, steady expansion of relations

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with other Arab states, and the slow repair of relations with Moscow. If Mubarak were ousted from office in an atmosphere of failure, however, the new leader probably would try to make some visible policy changes, including loosening ties with Washington.

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Neither the Islamic right nor the secular left has much chance to take power except as the result of a severe domestic crisis or possibly a military coup. A government of either extreme could be expected to reduce substantially Egypt's reliance on the United States. Relations with Israel would almost certainly worsen, although probably not to the point of war. A leftist regime would speed rapprochement with the USSR, but a fundamentalist government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood would be strongly anti-Communist.

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President Mubarak's departure from office does not appear imminent. He is in the second year of a six-year term and, at age 55, is in excellent health.

1970, Sadat by assassination in 1981). In each instance the vice president was quickly elected as the new president. In other respects the two cases are dissimilar.

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There is always the chance, however, of accidental death or assassination. Extremists of the sort who murdered Sadat have been contained but not eliminated by Egyptian security forces. Moreover, Egypt's serious economic and social problems could, with little warning, generate a political crisis capable of forcing Mubarak out of office.

In 1970 Sadat was generally regarded as a political lightweight. Even after his election as president, few expected that he would dominate Egyptian politics for a decade. He secured power only by winning a showdown against other senior figures in the regime—most notably Ali Sabri, the leftist head of the ruling party and one of two vice presidents—in the “corrective revolution” of May 1971.

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Constitutional Provisions

The Egyptian constitution specifies that, if the presidency becomes vacant, its powers will be assumed temporarily by the Speaker of the People's Assembly (or, if the Assembly has been dissolved, by the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court). The temporary president is ineligible for a full term. A new president must be nominated by a two-thirds vote of the People's Assembly and then approved by a majority of the electorate. The entire process is to be completed within 60 days.

By contrast, Mubarak had been groomed by Sadat to be his successor and had acquired considerable power during his six years as vice president. He used the post to control access to Sadat, participate actively in decisionmaking, and move his supporters into positions of influence. As a result, he was unchallenged for the presidency when Sadat was killed.

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Abu Ghazala as Front Runner

Egypt currently has no vice president and, consequently, no anointed heir to Mubarak. Nonetheless, Defense Minister Abu Ghazala probably is in as strong a position to become president as Mubarak was in 1981 and stronger than Sadat was in 1970. In discussions in government and other elite circles, Abu Ghazala is mentioned far more frequently than anyone else as the likely successor.

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As for the vice-presidency, the constitution states that the president “may appoint one or more vice presidents and may determine their powers and relieve them of their posts.” The only other references to the office stipulate that “the” vice president—as if there could be only one—shall temporarily assume the presidency if the president is either indicted or unable to perform his functions. Both Nasir and Sadat appointed and dismissed several vice presidents and at various times had none, one, or more than one.

Abu Ghazala enjoys substantial support in the officer corps, which is still the ultimate power broker in Egyptian politics. Abu Ghazala has become the most popular Defense Minister in years. A major reason is

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Past Successions

Both successions since the Egyptian republic was established in 1952 occurred when the incumbent president suddenly died (Nasir by natural causes in

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President Mubarak and Defense Minister Abu Ghazala



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the special attention he has given to improving pay and fringe benefits for servicemen. Among his most popular steps have been the construction of apartments, with the aim of making one available to every officer on easy terms, and the purchase of automobiles in volume for resale to officers at a discount.

establish bakeries, cattle farms, and other enterprises using military personnel but without financing from the defense budget. Abu Ghazala has exploited the strong public concern over supplies of bread by appearing at opening ceremonies for the new military-staffed bakeries.

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Abu Ghazala's image as a decisive leader helps his political standing.

These ceremonies have been part of a larger effort by Abu Ghazala and his staff to burnish the Defense Minister's image and demonstrate his fitness to assume broader responsibilities.

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Abu Ghazala thus may come to be seen as a useful alternative to the cautious Mubarak, just as Mubarak was at first a welcome change from the seemingly impetuous Sadat.

Abu Ghazala also has tried to increase his popularity by attending every important soccer match in Egypt and being photographed congratulating victorious Egyptian players.

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Abu Ghazala recently has been expanding the military's role in the economy.

Abu Ghazala's principal handicap is his rumored involvement in corruption, including alleged irregularities by the Egyptian firm EATSCO in shipping US arms to Egypt during his service as military attache in

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He has since created a National Services Organization, with a board of directors chaired by himself, which plans to

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Abu Ghazala congratulates athlete [redacted]

Washington from 1976 to 1980. [redacted]

[redacted] Mubarak has made the fight against corruption a major theme of his presidency, and we believe he would dissociate himself from Abu Ghazala if this politically volatile issue significantly damaged the Defense Minister's political standing. If seriously discredited, Abu Ghazala could suffer the same fate as the Ministers of Supply and Industry, whom Mubarak fired in March after they were implicated in the corruption trial of Sadat's half-brother. [redacted]

Abu Ghazala's association with the United States—dating from his days as attache—also may be a liability, given the political sensitivity in Egypt of overly close military ties to Washington. [redacted]

For the time being, however, there are no strong challengers to Abu Ghazala as a successor to Mubarak. None of the other prominent figures in the [redacted]



Foreign Minister Kamal Hasan Ali [redacted]

Liaison ©

government seem to spark enthusiasm. Prime Minister Muhi al-Din is neither liked nor respected in the military, [redacted]

[redacted] Foreign Minister Ali, who has a military background, enjoys more respect than the Prime Minister but does not appear ambitious to become president. Moreover, Ali's uncertain health invariably is raised whenever he is mentioned as a possible successor. [redacted]

Nonetheless, Abu Ghazala could lose his front-runner's position long before Mubarak—who is virtually the same age—vacates the presidency. Regardless of how the corruption issue ends, it is uncertain how smoothly Abu Ghazala and Mubarak can continue to work together. Their relationship appears generally good now, but the same proclivity for quick decisions that in some eyes makes Abu Ghazala an attractive alternative to Mubarak may also lead to friction with the President. There are indications already that Mubarak wants to lower Abu Ghazala's high public profile. [redacted]

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The Military Succession

If Abu Ghazala stumbles, the next most likely successor to Mubarak probably would emerge from the senior military ranks. It is difficult to determine exactly which Egyptian generals are potential political leaders because their advancement has required them to demonstrate military competence without attracting enough attention for their superiors to perceive them as threats. Among those mentioned most often as candidates for higher positions are: the commander of air defense, Lt. Gen. Sayid Hamdi; the chief of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Labib Shurab; the military attache in Washington, Maj. Gen. Abd al-Aziz Qandil; and the ambassador in London, Maj. Gen. Hassan Abu Sa'ada. The officer with perhaps the brightest prospects, however, is Lt. Gen. Ibrahim Abd-al-Ghaffur al-Orabi, who in June was appointed chief of staff of the armed forces. Orabi clearly is more ambitious than the previous chief of staff, and his new job makes him a strong contender to replace Abu Ghazala as Defense Minister if the latter moves to the vice presidency.

Orabi has followed a career path similar to those of other officers who have risen to the top, with assignments as commander of the 2nd Field Army and as chief of operations. He has impressed US officials as a forceful, competent, and confident officer. He commands respect from his subordinates, although some of his colleagues reportedly consider him too outspoken. His chances for political leadership probably are helped by his being a descendent of Ahmad al-Orabi, an early hero of Egyptian nationalism who led a military revolt in 1882.

Orabi's few comments on political matters suggest that he is as strong a nationalist as his famous ancestor. While not openly anti-American, he has voiced reservations about close military ties to the United States. He also expresses hostility toward the USSR, although he has commended the Soviet military assistance program.



Lt. Gen. Ibrahim Abd-al-Ghaffur al-Orabi

Vice-Presidential Considerations

There have been many rumors and reports during the past several months that Mubarak was about to appoint a vice president. Virtually all of these reports identify Abu Ghazala as a likely choice.

Possibly Mubarak made a tentative decision to that effect but deferred action because of the publicity the EATSCO case was then receiving.

In a published interview in mid-April, however, Mubarak denied that he would soon name two vice presidents. He further stated that he was "not in a hurry" and would wait another year or more before filling the office.

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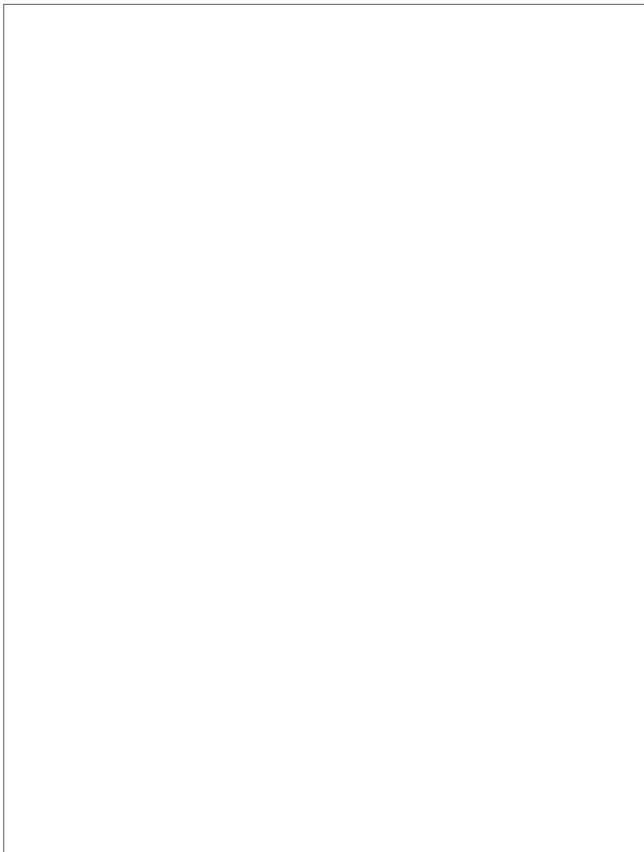
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Prime Minister Fuad Muhi al-Din, President Mubarak, and former Prime Minister Mustafa Khalil at NDP Congress

Probably the most politically feasible solution would be a dual vice-presidency of Abu Ghazala and a civilian (such as Muhi al-Din or former Prime Minister Mustafa Khalil), with Abu Ghazala retaining only vaguely defined responsibilities for supervising defense.

this arrangement would balance the military and civilian elements in the government. It also would enable Mubarak to respond both to public criticism about the vice-presidency remaining vacant and to uneasiness among some civilian political leaders about the growing economic role the Army has assumed under Abu Ghazala's leadership.

We believe Mubarak's statement, however, that he is in no hurry to appoint a vice president. He often has spoken publicly of the need to maintain stability in government and to avoid sudden changes in policy or personnel. Further postponement of a vice-presidential selection would be consistent with his tendency to defer hard decisions.

In the meantime, Abu Ghazala's ability to assume control and accomplish a smooth transition in the event of Mubarak's demise does not require the title of vice president. His position as Defense Minister places him after the President in the military chain of command and necessarily would give him a central role in any crisis. Mubarak himself probably considers Abu Ghazala his de facto political heir.

The Politics of Presidential Selection

The Egyptian military would have a major say in who becomes the next president, even though it has no constitutionally prescribed role in the selection process and the number of military officers in the government has steadily declined since the 1973 war. Senior officers would be likely to convey their preferences informally to leaders of the ruling party and the legislature. If military leaders agreed among themselves on a single candidate, it would be very difficult for civilian politicians to install anyone else.

If Mubarak lost power in a political or economic crisis, the armed forces almost certainly would take a more direct role in the installation of a new president. In the event that internal security and order broke

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down, military commanders might take the initiative by insisting that Mubarak resign. The more serious the crisis, the more completely the military would dominate the selection of a new leader. []

Even if the domestic situation were calm and constitutional procedures fully observed, neither the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) nor the People's Assembly would be likely to play a major independent role in the selection process. The NDP is not an autonomous center of power, as the Arab Socialist Union was under Ali Sabri. The NDP almost certainly would nominate a candidate, but this action probably would only formalize a decision already reached through informal consultations outside the party apparatus. The People's Assembly, which has an overwhelming NDP majority, is largely a rubberstamp. []

Civilian members of Mubarak's cabinet and inner circle would play some part in the selection process, but in his absence their influence would be uncertain. Muhi al-Din and presidential adviser Usama al-Baz, for example, are two of the most important figures in formulating and executing Mubarak's policies, but neither has an independent base of support. []

Neither the Islamic extremists nor the secular opposition parties would have much impact on the selection process unless they first became far stronger and more credible than they are now. The Muslim Brotherhood, however, represents a major current of Egyptian opinion and thus may carry some weight in the choice of a president. Both the Brotherhood and the new political leadership probably would want to preserve the informal understanding that has existed (albeit with some strains) under Mubarak, whereby the government tolerates the Brotherhood even though the organization ostensibly is illegal. []

Effects on Egyptian Policy

A government led by Abu Ghazala could be expected to continue the main lines of Mubarak's policies, especially foreign policy. Abu Ghazala's frequent disparaging remarks about the Soviets suggest that, as with Mubarak, experience in Soviet military schools left him with a negative attitude toward the USSR. He is, nevertheless, willing to do business with Moscow, including the purchase of Soviet-made arms. Abu Ghazala's comments also reveal strong distrust

of both Israel and Libya. We do not believe, however, that his accession to the presidency would increase the chance of armed conflict with either of those countries or of abrogation of the peace treaty with Israel. []

Abu Ghazala's reputation for being pro-United States generally is deserved. He has voiced less concern than other Egyptian leaders about US military activities in the Middle East. In recent comments to US officials, for example, he expressed satisfaction with the US naval and air deployments made in February to counter the Libyan threat to Sudan. Abu Ghazala has complained about the amount of US aid to Egypt, however, and has criticized the influence of the "Jewish lobby" on the US Government. Abu Ghazala seems to believe that he knows Americans and American politics well. As president he might campaign harder than Mubarak has for increased US assistance. []

In domestic affairs, Abu Ghazala has criticized the lack of progress in the Egyptian economy. His impatience with the slow pace of economic development probably is another reason (in addition to personal ambition) why he has thrust the Army into a variety of commercial activities. If he took power, Abu Ghazala would search for alternative policies that offered hope of stimulating economic growth, but there is no indication that he has any specific ideas in this regard. []

If Abu Ghazala does not succeed Mubarak, the new president probably would be someone else who reflects the preferences of the Egyptian military and who thus would be unlikely to depart significantly from current Egyptian policy. Such a successor could be expected to follow a generally moderate foreign policy, although without as close an association with the United States as Abu Ghazala appears prepared to accept. The lack of support in either the military or the civilian population for a new war with Israel would encourage continued observance of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Any successor would have less personal commitment than Mubarak to the Camp David accords, however, and thus probably would have even less interest in developing better

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relations with Tel Aviv. The steady improvement in relations with the Arab states would continue, as would the slow repair of relations with the USSR. In domestic politics, any new leader would face most of the same constraints as Mubarak. In particular, it would remain difficult to impose stringent austerity measures or other significant economic reforms without risking popular protests. [REDACTED]

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The successor's policies, however, would partly depend on the circumstances in which he assumed power. If Mubarak lost his office in an atmosphere of failure and recrimination, any successor would try to distinguish his own policies from Mubarak's. This could mean some loosening of ties to the United States because Mubarak has relied heavily on this relationship for Egypt's military security and economic development and for the achievement of a Middle East peace settlement. In short, failure by Mubarak in any of these areas would make the US connection appear less an asset and more a liability. [REDACTED]

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Changes in Egyptian policy would be substantially greater if either the Islamic right or the secular left took power. Neither type of regime—especially a leftist one—appears likely, but there is a chance that either one could arise as the result of a severe domestic crisis or possibly a military coup. A government of either extreme could be expected to substantially reduce Egypt's reliance on the United States. Relations with Israel almost certainly would worsen, although probably not to the point of war. A leftist regime would speed rapprochement with the USSR, but a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood would be strongly anti-Communist. [REDACTED]

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